

Domestic abuse: Ending the nightmare parts 1 & 2

By: KELLY HAACK/Associate Editor

In the first of a two-part series on domestic violence, the Gatekeeper shares the story of advocate Jill's descent into and escape from the nightmare of domestic violence.

After a whirlwind, four-month romance in August of 2001, Jill, a single mother of a teenage daughter, married a man who seemed to be kind and caring. She thought he was, in the words of her friend, "the man of her dreams";

But in an extremely short time Jill's dream turned into a nightmare from which she couldn't wake up.

"After we got married, there was an almost immediate change in how he spoke to me," she said.

Her husband began to berate, blame and tear Jill down. He got angry quickly and blamed Jill for his anger.

"A very intense emotional, psychological and verbal battery took place on a daily basis," she said. "Abusers are extremely talented manipulators";

Jill recalled her husband making statements such as: "If you wouldn't have done this, I would not have responded that way." He would twist the actual events and facts of things that happened.

And she believed him.

"It was a proactive methodology to make me believe that what was going on was my fault," she said. "When that happens daily, multiple times a day, [victims] believe it.";

The abuse quickly escalated into violence.

"In March of 2002, 10 months after we were married, I called 911 for the first time," Jill said.

But it wasn't the first incidence of violence. Even before that day, Jill endured "multiple incidents of physical threats and violence." The abuse only happened when Jill was alone with her husband.

While the couple separated briefly, they quickly reunited.

Jill often gets the question, "Why did you reunite?" In answer to that question, Jill shares that she had started processing and thinking in an abnormal manner.

"I would equate it to playing a chess game," she said. "I always had to be very aware of what his move was going to be or how he would react. I would base my entire being on that as a way to not get hurt. It was a very sad survival mechanism to play this emotional chess game as a way to keep safe.";

In the midst of the chess game, Jill became a psychological mess. A part of her knew what was going on wasn't right. But, she would also play conversations with herself in her head.

"The conversation went like this: 'Well he's saying it's my fault. It must be my fault. So if I just

change what I'm doing, he won't do this," she said.

She began to believe that she had control over what went on because it was "her fault."

While Jill knows now that it wasn't her fault, at the time her husband had so manipulated her thinking that she was unable to separate the truth from his lies. And she isn't alone. Jill, who now advocates for domestic abuse victims, said this is very typical of the relationship between the abuser and the one who is abused.

The next four months were the "most horrifying months" of Jill's life. The violence was escalating.

"I thought on numerous occasions that I was not going to see the end of the day," she said. "I was convinced that I was losing my sanity. I weighed about 20 pounds less than I weigh now, and so I looked like a holocaust victim. I actually had neurological tests done because of physical symptoms that were manifested by stress: losing my balance, memory loss, not being able to concentrate."

Her house "resembled a demolition zone on the inside," because of holes in the drywall from her husband throwing things.

"I was choked. I was spit on. I was kicked. I was slapped. I was sexually assaulted...multiple times. I was threatened that I would be killed, and believed it," she recalled. "Any type of violence is not right, but it was a serious life threatening situation."

Yet, Jill never fought back. To do so would result in her being hurt even worse.

Then, as summer was winding to a close in 2002, Jill's husband moved out of the house. She was relieved.

"I thought, 'Thank God it's over. He'll just go away, and it will be over,'" she said.

But the nightmare wasn't over. What she didn't know at that time is that statistically after a separation women are in the greatest danger. Jill was no different.

"He would come back to the house and just terrorize me," she recalled.

Two weeks after he left, in September, the terror came to its climax. Jill was home alone when her husband returned. When he learned that Jill's 16-year-old daughter was not home, he became "extremely agitated" and went into a "full blown violent rage."

"I felt like I was going to die that day because the look in his eyes was very different than I had seen before," she said.

The man who was supposed to love and protect Jill instead violently attacked her. At one point he smacked her ear with a cupped hand. The pain was so severe Jill thought her eardrum had burst. She started screaming as she had never done before. She recalls seeing a look in her husband's eyes of "I've really hurt her." So she kept screaming.

That was a turning point, but by no means the end of Jill's nightmare. Her husband left the home, and Jill went to a girlfriend's house where she called her counselor. She was told to call the police, which Jill did.

The deputy met her at her house, saw the holes in the walls and saw how upset she was. Jill showed him pictures of abuse injuries taken by her sister-in-law. "No one deserves to be treated like this," the deputy told her.

Her husband was arrested, and a month later Jill filed for divorce. In April of 2003, Jill's husband received "one of the harshest sentences ever given out in Sarpy County for assault." It seemed her nightmare was over.

"I recall saying to a girlfriend the last time he was arrested, "I'm so glad this is over. I can't wait to get on with my life," she said. "And she said to me, "It will never be over. It gets easier to deal with, but it will never be over.""

Jill realizes now how right her friend was. "Those internal scars take a long time to go away," she said.

Even today, Jill is affected by what happened to her during that year-and-a-half of terror. She has since remarried, and her marriage is impacted by what her ex-husband did to her. For example, if her husband tries to touch her on the neck, she flinches. It's a response she cannot control, and as a result her husband cannot touch her on the neck. It comes from having been strangled by her ex-husband.

Speaking about her new husband, Jill, said, "He has done an incredibly amazing job of being sensitive to all of those areas that I am healing or have healed in but are still very much a part of who I am."

And what has been Jill's greatest help in healing?

"God has been amazing in helping me heal, in giving me the strength to get through it," she said;

Part 2

Last month, in the first of a two-part series on domestic violence, the Gatekeeper shared the story of advocate Jill's descent into and escape from the nightmare of domestic violence. After a whirlwind romance she married someone she thought was the man of her dreams. But shortly after the wedding he began to verbally abuse her. The verbal abuse rapidly turned into physical abuse. Over the next year-and-a-half, at the hands of her now ex-husband, Jill was choked, kicked, spit on, slapped, sexually assaulted and threatened that she would be killed. After one especially frightening episode, Jill called the police for a second time, and her husband was arrested. The following month she filed for divorce. While she was eventually freed from the abuse, Jill still struggles with the emotional scars he left.

This month the Gatekeeper explores the dynamics of domestic violence and how individuals and churches can reach out to help women living the terror of domestic abuse.

"As many times as I talk about this, it doesn't get any easier," Jill said, referring to the time when she lived through a marriage to an abusive man. "In fact, I'd rather be having a root canal than talk about it. But I do it because I think it is so important to be a voice for women who don't have one, or have no one to hear them."

Domestic violence is a painful topic for women who have suffered, or are suffering, through the nightmare. With it comes shame, embarrassment, and fear that if the victim speaks to anyone the perpetrator will retaliate and the abuse will be worse.

In their article on domestic violence in Loyola University's journal of community-based research, PRAGmatics, authors Christine George, Ph.D., K. Sujata, Ph.D., and Cynthia R. Milsap wrote, "Some women keep silent about abuse because of shame or fear that they will be considered a failure if the relationship does not work. Some may rationalize that it is their fault. They must have done something wrong to anger him."

Whatever the reason, victims of domestic abuse frequently keep silent about what is happening to them. For this reason, they need people who care enough to find out about their abuse and reach out to help them. Advocacy for victims of domestic violence starts with education.

The Dynamics of Domestic Violence

"What signs or characteristics would you look for in a man to indicate he might be an abuser?" "Why didn't you leave him?" "Why did you reunite with him?" These are all questions Jill gets when she speaks to groups about her experience with domestic violence. The answers to these questions are complex and take examining the issue from many angles, starting with the courtship.

Jill married her now ex-husband only four months after she began courting him.

"That's commonplace for abusive men to have a short courtship, and to marry quickly," she said. "It's not a statistic, but in women I've spoken to it's very common."

Jill is "pretty confident" that had she gone through "all four seasons"—dated her ex-husband a year—before she married him, she would have seen him for what he was.

"You can't hide who you are very long," she said.

The American Psychiatric Association's website, healthyminds.org, confirms Jill's observation, calling a "quick whirlwind romance" one of the early warning signs of abuse.

Once married, or even before marriage, it usually doesn't take long for abusers to begin the abuse, usually starting with verbal and emotional abuse, tearing down the partner's defenses before escalating to physical violence. Jill was no exception.

"There was a very intense emotional, psychological and verbal battery that took place on an almost daily basis," she said.

Jill's ex-husband blamed her for the abuse that took place, making her feel as if it were her fault.

"When that happens daily, multiple times a day, you believe it," she said. "That's very important in answering the question that so many people ask, which is, 'Why didn't you just leave?'"

According to an article by Joyce Parker PhD., LCSW, on the National Association of Social Workers' website, www.helpstartshere.org, the reasons women stay in a domestic violence situation are multiple. Even so, there are several overarching reasons why women stay in or return to a violent situation:

- Rationalization and Denial. The woman is confused when the person she loved and trusted hurts her, so she "denies the reality of the situation, the options available, the truth about the victimizer and the victimization, and the causes of the violence."
- Psychological Consequences. The psychological effects of domestic violence are akin to Post-traumatic stress disorder with physical, anxiety and depressive symptoms. The woman begins to identify with her abuser, and she blames herself for his abuse.
- Walking On Egg Shells. The victim believes she can change the behavior of the abuser by changing her behavior. She "walks on egg shells" to prevent an angry outburst, leading to a sense of "helplessness and hopelessness."
- New Coping Mechanisms Needed. Leaving the perpetrator requires the victims to employ a whole new set of survival strategies and resources she may not have, such as social support, financial resources, spiritual help and community resources. For women who have been isolated from social, economic and spiritual resources by the abuser, the needs for survival may seem overwhelming.
- Societal Attitudes. In a survey of 400 people, 19% checked at least one circumstance in which they believed wife beating is acceptable. Confronted by such attitudes, victims are too humiliated and ashamed to seek help. In addition, people with such attitudes are less apt to reach out to the abuser with a helping hand.

Jill pointed out that domestic violence often cycles, adding to the confusion the woman feels. There's a time of escalating build-up leading to the actual violence, and then a "honeymoon" period in which the husband is contrite, apologetic and extremely kind, showering his wife with gifts or verbal kindness. Then the cycle starts all over again.

"It makes it difficult for women to leave," Jill said, "because they're so confused by him saying he's sorry and he'll never do it again. And of course they want to believe him."

For Jill that cycle never happened. There was no honeymoon period between incidents. Instead she said he blamed her for what he did or, equally damaging, pretended it never happened.

No matter the reasons the women stay in the abusive situation, the reality is they need help in getting out of their nightmare.

Reaching Out to Victims of Domestic Violence

Jill believes that one of the most powerful aspects of her abuse story is that it reveals that domestic violence, also called intimate partner violence, can happen to anyone.

"A lot of people look at me and can't believe that I was ever a victim of domestic violence," she said.

The tall, slender woman comes across as well-groomed and confident—not the stereotype many people in society have about victims of domestic violence.

In reality, domestic violence crosses all racial, socioeconomic, age, and even gender groups. For example, in 2006, 8% of all calls to domestic violence hotlines in Nebraska were men.

For this reason, one of the first steps to reaching out to victims of domestic violence is to recognize that domestic violence does not discriminate. Anyone in a person's circle of influence could be a victim of domestic violence. How, then, do we reach out to victims with a helping hand?

Jill would like to see the church get involved. While she was still married to her ex-husband, they would go to church together on Sundays and then go home to a potentially dangerous day.

"I'd go from sitting in church to going home and having this nightmare start," she said.

She'd like to see pastors and church leaders educated on the issue of domestic violence. She'd also like to see resources offered in the churches for victims—even cards with the domestic violence number in bathroom stalls or a note at the bottom of the bulletin would help.

"I'm not sure it's fair to have the church be an end-all be-all resource, but a conduit to getting to the appropriate resources would be huge," she said.

On an individual level, Jill remembers two personal incidents that indicate ways people can get involved. In the midst of her situation, a close friend made her promise that if she ever felt in danger she would call 911. One day when she was in danger, Jill remembered her promise to her friend and summoned the strength to make the call. Now she advises people to extract that same promise from anyone they know to be in a relationship with an abuser.

"Because when I needed to, I heard her voice. I heard her voice saying 'Promise me you'll call 911.'"

In another incident, Jill went to work with a gash she could not cover up with a turtleneck or makeup. A co-worker asked her about the gash, and Jill said she had run into something at home.

“I actually remember thinking that I wished that person would ask more questions,” Jill said.

She now entreats people to “ask more questions”—approach the person in a caring and loving way. While that the person might be offended, Jill believes the risk is worth potentially helping someone in an abusive situation.

Jill is now married to a man who is sensitive to her past. Even so, while the nightmare is over and she is healing, she still struggles with some of the repercussions of having lived the nightmare.

Hopefully, as the church and individuals reach out to those living with domestic abuse, the nightmare can end for many more and the process of healing can begin. †;

The effects of domestic violence

According to Jill, domestic abuse does not discriminate. Victims come from all races, all socio-economic backgrounds and women of all ages. Following are some statistics on domestic abuse in Iowa, Nebraska and the United States.

Iowa

- Between January 1995 and October 2006, at least 104 women were killed in Iowa by a husband, boyfriend or intimate partner, and 20 children were killed in related incidents.

- Domestic violence programs provided services to 21,780 victims from July 2004 to June 2005.

- In fiscal year 2005, 2,603 women and 2,149 children sought refuge in domestic violence shelters.

Nebraska

- In early September there were 5,583 current, valid protection orders in Nebraska.

- In 2006, there were 41,734 domestic violence calls to Nebraska’s hotlines; 90% were women.

- In the last 16 months, there have been 9,901 women/children sheltered in domestic violence shelters; this does not include homeless shelter beds.

United States

- In 76% of intimate partner homicides, women are the victims.

- Intimate partner homicide is the second leading cause of death in pregnant women.

- Domestic violence costs \$4.1 billion dollars a year in direct health care/mental health costs and \$1.8 billion in indirect costs such as loss of work and sick time.

(Statistics taken from: Public record, Nebraska Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Coalition, and the Department of Justice.)

Next month, in part-two, the Gatekeeper will explore some of the intricacies of the complex issue of domestic violence and how individuals and churches can reach out to help women living the terror of domestic abuse.